

At Any Cost

Risk management, safety and constant planning are a way of life for the military, but so are chaos, deadlines, demands and stress. Sometimes it seems as if there isn't enough time in the day to accomplish all our tasks, but the job always seems to get done. Benjamin Franklin wrote, "If you want to enjoy one of the greatest luxuries in life, the luxury of having enough time, time to rest, time to think things through, time to get things done and know you have done them to the best of your ability, remember, there is only one way. Take enough time to think and plan things in the order of their importance." When leaders forget to follow basic principles like these, people get hurt or killed.

We were setting up a convoy operation from North Carolina to Virginia. We were doing all the usual steps: planning for hours on end, reviewing courses of action, preparing maps, checking routes, scheduling sleep plans, briefing personnel, testing equipment and establishing emergency plans. We needed to complete the trip in less than two days and, according to the risk assessment, that goal was attainable.

The first leg of the trip was pretty uneventful except for a few vehicle breakdowns, but otherwise everything seemed to be going well. There was, however, one factor we overlooked along the way—fatigue.

All our vehicles needed fuel about halfway to our destination, and we'd planned for the refueling stop. Refueling the vehicles would take all night, and our plan called for all drivers to get eight hours of sleep with no exceptions. This is where leadership really should've been on their toes, but as we all know it takes just one person to break the rules and create tragedy. One of our 5-ton drivers didn't rest that night and fell asleep at the wheel on our way back to North Carolina the next day. The truck hit a car that was pulling onto the highway from a gas station.

What could our leadership have done to prevent this accident? We should've practiced Composite Risk Management continuously since circumstances can change every minute, hour or day. Constantly reassess the situations and hazards around you to determine if the mission is worth the risk and apply new control measures when needed, then follow up with close supervision to ensure those risk decisions are carried out by everyone. Teamwork and communication are the keys to success, but everyone must realize they have a leadership role when it comes to risk management and getting the job done safely.

---Editor's note: The author's name was withheld by request. If you would like to publish a story anonymously in Knowledge, please contact the editor by e-mail at knowledge@crc.army.mil.